

Joseph Breil Finds That Art Is Long

His Opera, 'The Legend,' to Be Sung at the Metropolitan, Reward of Waiting and Working

By CHLOE ARNOLD.

NEAR twilight of one of those pearl gray days of late September Joseph Breil sat in the front drawing room of his house in West Ninety-first street talking. He was rather crumpled up in a low rocking chair, his hands clasping one knee. The open manuscript of his opera, "The Legend," was on the piano, and the breeze tried to turn over a page each time it came in, as if eager to sing the songs there.

Mr. Breil's house bears the same relation to the elevated railroad that Mme Bonfanti's does further downtown. It is in just such silent places as these that people are able to cultivate their own little plots of New York life. And when they get there they have the quiet joy of one who has come home.

Mr. Breil and Mme. Bonfanti have this notable resemblance. Whatever their age is, they can never be old. When you talk to Mme. Bonfanti, even though you never saw her dance, you sense that joyousness that eternal youth of the artist, which drew people to Niblo's Garden long ago. And when you talk to Joseph Breil you see the boy who left home and came to New York because he had to make music.

Wins His Place After Twenty Years.

But though they live in like places and under much the same conditions, Mme Bonfanti and Mr. Breil are very different persons. For Mr. Breil, after twenty years of waiting, is to have his one act opera, "The Legend," sung at the Metropolitan some time after Christmas, and Mme. Bonfanti, famous at 15, is in retirement, with none but a few old friends to know where she dwells.

Had this conversation taken place twenty years ago it would probably have been quite different. For then Mr. Breil had endured just enough insolences to be interested in seeing what would happen to him next. He knows all about the merits of Bryant Park for bedless nights, especially from his experiences in the mid-summer of 1902. But, he said modestly, in referring to this phase of his life, he didn't wish to appear to be taking any honors from Dr. Garfield by showing that he had had the —less idea so far in advance.

Twenty years ago Mr. Breil might have had some principles to give to the world for the use of young composers. As it was, all he said about his opera, written two years ago and accepted by the Metropolitan only last summer, was: "I hope the people will like it. I wrote it for them."

Joseph Breil was born forty-eight years ago in Pittsburg, Pa. He has a pair of very lively gray eyes which have in them still the look of a boy just starting out to explore the world. He is tall, thin and wiry, and his crisp black hair has in it many a strand of silver.

He had two sisters, and one of them still teaches piano playing in Pittsburg. He shares an inherited love for art with Paul Breil, the sculptor, and other relatives. When he was 14 his mother let him study the violin. But his father was not at all pleased with this. The father was a lawyer, very successful, from all accounts, and he regarded the law as the one suitable profession for his only son and made plans accordingly.

Extravagant Love of Theatre.

Early in life the younger Breil developed an extravagant fondness for the theatre, and as the rest of the family considered it a prodigality to go to a play more than four times a year he was obliged to see his favorite artists in secret.

He managed it this way: Always he was given 25 cents for buying his lunch-con. If a matinee promised to be interesting, as all matinees did, he didn't eat. The play was meat and drink enough for that one day. In this way he got acquainted with the tops of the heads of every great singer and actress and actor who came to Pittsburg—he saw them from the top gallery.



It happened quite naturally that in the old days he often absented himself in imagination from the home fireside and was away playing the part of an exiled prince or swinging the cutlass of a pirate (to music). He liked history then, as he does now. History and music are his favorite subjects. And this devotion to history, sincere and honest, brought from his father the only approval he received.

At 17 he was a student in the Western University of Pennsylvania. Of mornings he went to his classes, and in the afternoon he clerked in his father's law office. About that time he had seen enough plays and operas to want to try his hand at making one. Opera, being full of plot and music, naturally claimed his attention.

Wrote Music and Dodged Law.

He would come into the office carrying his books and some blank sheets for music. His father was frequently out, and Breil wrote most of the music for his first opera by going at it hard while his father was away. When he heard his step in the hall he would fall to reading Blackstone's "Commentaries." He read with an absorbed interest which would have deceived any one but his father, who regarded law as the most interesting and important thing in the world.

At that time Breil knew nothing about writing music, but by playing over his compositions on his fiddle he was able to remedy defects which might have had the effect on the audience which Rousseau's first attempt did.

The name of the piece was "Orlando, the Bogus Duke" (book and music by J. Breil, Jr.). He showed this great work to his mother with the proper amount of flourishes. He played it all to her, and she agreed to let him produce it in the family drawing room.

Aided by friends who had a leaning for carpentry, he built a stage at one end of the room, thus reducing a once comfortable retreat to all the discomfort of a ruin unhallowed by historic association. Whether this was the true root for his father's active disapproval of the practice of composing music is a question in Breil's mind. But it afforded suitable ground, and the father's hatred of the profession was sustained through his life.

Otherwise the piece was a great success. All the friends took part in it. "Orlando," of course, was the sort of villain who has a muffled curse on his lips, the heroine was hapless, with golden hair, and the action was built upon the well known triangular pattern. Which, perhaps, is

one of the reasons why "The Legend" has no triangle in it.

Breil rehearsed the orchestra and the singers, and the opera is to this day treasured by his mother out in Pittsburg. She was keeping it, she always told him, to show him when he wrote his masterpiece, as she always had confidence that he would write one.

Breil laughed very much the afternoon when he was telling about all this.

"There are parts of that 'Orlando,'" he said, "that I'm not ashamed of yet." And he went to the piano and played a quintet distinctly melodic, one of the fine parts of the opera.

In 1888 he persuaded his father that he would gain much by going abroad to finish his studies. He would take up law in the University at Leipzig. So he spent that year and the two years following, not, as he had said, with the law, but with Adolph Brodsky. When he returned to Pittsburg in 1891 he had a tolerable knowledge of musical theory, singing and playing the piano, and knew nothing at all of the law.

This he immediately demonstrated to his father. He was given three cases which any person of average intelligence could have won. He lost them. Then his father, looking very noncommittal, gave him two more in which it was just a matter of seeing the magistrate first. This he forgot to do, as he was interested in something else.

His father called him into his own office and told him that henceforth he could consider getting along in the world as best he could, by his own purse and perspiration; that he had finished with him.

Breil came immediately to New York without a dollar or a friend. In that year he knew what it meant to be stranded in many cities of the country, including New York, Louisville and Savannah.

Why He Favors Large Cities.

He stopped while he was telling this to think and smile to himself. "I'd advise young composers," he said, "to choose big cities for hard times. You're not so conspicuous." It went rather hard with him, as he had been accustomed to live the life of a regular human being, eating food and sleeping in a bed as a matter of course.

Finally he was engaged as a tenor in the Emma Juch Opera Company, which had much talent and no business manager. In Savannah, Ga., they all found themselves in such a situation that upon Breil at least the hardship had a sobering effect, and when he did get a chance to come to his own part of the world again he fled to Pittsburg and stayed there for

Attains Philosophy of Life in Realizing Dream of Youth and Never Regrets Dropping Law

six years. In this time he was director of the cathedral choir and a teacher of singing.

He found out, however, that he wanted to make music, not teach it. So in 1900 he ventured again to New York. After he had spent his money he slept in Bryant Park and did many other things which he said were too uncomfortable to talk about. He could sympathize with Wagner, who, in debt, bought himself a fur coat in Karlsruhe, and said, when reproved by his creditors, that owing money didn't necessarily keep a man warm.

Until nine years ago Mr. Breil was occupied with various musical odd jobs and later wrote music for moving pictures. He said he hadn't much pride in this, and some of the things he did nobody ever heard of and he hoped nobody ever would.

"The Climax" His First Chance.

His first chance of any account was when he was engaged to write the incidental music for Edward Locke's play, "The Climax." He looked up in telling this with a half humorous, half crucified smile, much in Howells's manner when he tells how he was chosen as an editor of the *Atlantic*, more for his merits as a proof reader than for anything else, and adds that "each man must eat his humble pie" with what grace he can.

"The reason," Mr. Breil said, "that they got me to write this music was because they didn't have enough money to hire Victor Herbert for the job."

But putting all that aside and the fact that others had tried their hands and their efforts were not accepted, Mr. Breil wrote four songs, among them one which is still remembered, "The Song of the Soul."

This gained him a hearing at least with the publishers of music. But still it was not a reputation. And as publishers have to excess that very natural human trait, the desire to put their money on a sure thing, the results were not too encouraging.

Later on he wrote the music for some moving pictures, particularly Sarah Bernhardt's "Queen Elizabeth," then for "The Birth of a Nation" and other plays. This work took him to California and it was there in the winter of 1916 that he found himself with the great desire to write another opera. By this time he had a great knowledge of musical form but lacked that dash and courage which supplied words and music for "Orlando, the Bogus Duke."

At that time he knew only one thing: he had to write music. He would be pleased if people liked his music and managers produced it, and he would like to get some money out of it; but even if he starved he had to write another opera.

Where Libretto Originated.

One morning, in search of a libretto, he met his friend Jacques Byrne, a scenario writer. Byrne, one fancies without exactly knowing, is something of a Leon Berthelini, a person who could step down or up, as fortune indicated, with equal gallantry of bearing. As it is, Breil says, he has sung in opera, played in Shakespearean roles and written moving picture plays. To a person of his experience supplying the book for a one act opera was as nothing.

After a few false starts, such as supplying a war play, which was too elaborate, he gave the anxious composer the story for "The Legend." This much may be told of it: there are four characters and the scene is laid in a mythical Muscovite country.

Just as soon as he got the story Mr. Breil set to work in Los Angeles at writing his opera. He would rise about 8 and be at work long before 10 of a morning, stopping for the day at 4 in the afternoon. He commenced on December 1, 1916, and on March 19, 1917, finished it off.

Some Californians became interested and they decided to have a company present the work in several cities of the country. But when war came his supporters melted away and Breil returned again to

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